

CLEA: Community Learning for Environmental Action Landcare Victoria Inc & Natural Resources Conservation League

Three Year Progress Report and Next Steps

CLEA is setting up support for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and support within the community environment sector, beginning with the Landcare movement and with a focus on the social side of community environment work—*organising* community action, *collaborating* with government and other community organisations, and *influencing agendas* locally and in government policy and programs.

Our method has been pragmatic: talk to people in Landcare about what they need, try things out in action, then base the next cycle of action on what we learn. CLEA now has an approach that works at three levels:

- *At grassroots level*, support for peer-to-peer inquiry in Committees of Management, with 7 active Landcare Networks in three regions using the CLEA sessions, reaching and supporting around 90 Landcare groups. Landcare Network CoMs think about their Network's long-term future, frame a *Question Without Easy Answers*, and review past approaches. Committees enjoy thinking how to build Network capacity, and they go on to initiate action that builds capacity. Their Question Without an Easy Answer provides a structure for documenting progress, reflecting on next steps, and sharing progress with other Landcare Networks.
- *At regional level*, we are supporting *Network Weavers*. Network Weavers connect people and move knowledge and support through the Landcare community. CLEA is putting network weaving on the agenda, with CMAs identifying 'go-to' people with good networks into technical expertise in agriculture, land management and conservation, and getting stories of a wider range of innovators to Network Weavers so they can extend their networks.
- Across the State, CLEA is supporting peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and inquiry in LVIs regional Forums. The format of speakers plus questions is not enough—Forum participants are innovators ready for issue-based knowledge sharing and problem-solving. LVI's 2017 *Landcare Professionals Forum* (40 participants) was developed by CLEA as a peer-to-peer event, and successfully trialed three p2p learning formats.

What's needed next in 2018-19. CLEA needs to consolidate gains and connect out:

1. Maintain support for peer inquiry by Landcare Network CoMs
2. Convene knowledge sharing between community environment groups
3. Communicate the stories of what works and why
4. Keep strengthening peer-to-peer learning in State Forums
5. Strengthen Network Weaving at regional scale.

The vision

CLEA's purpose is to find out how best to support peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and support within the community environment sector, beginning with the Landcare movement and with a focus on the social side of community environment work—*organising* community action, *collaborating* with government and other community organisations, and *influencing agendas* locally and in government policy and programs.

We believe local groups deserve more enough focused, robust and collegial inquiry on the social side of environmental work. By learning from and with each other, they will stay strong, engaged and viable. Creating the supports for that peer-to-peer learning is CLEA's task.

At CLEA's inception, the Victorian Landcare Council¹ had committed to building capacity in the Landcare community, beginning with Landcare members. Volunteers power Landcare activity, and just like their professional staff, they grow when they can develop their skills and knowledge. The VLC put them in the frame in its goals, and LVI holds onto this with one of its purposes to *"provide training and up skilling opportunities to paid staff, executive and general group members."*

CLEA's funders have been LVI and Natural Resources Conservation League (NRCL), whose Grants Program aims to 'support local groups and networks to flourish, share knowledge and experiences and build community engagement and support', specifically to 'the capacity of local groups to implement and maintain on ground projects that contribute to landscape restoration, connectivity and environmental sustainability'. CLEA's jumping off point has been NRCL's Objective #3:

'promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences amongst groups through mentoring, education and related strategies'.

The initial design by Kaye Rodden and Ross Colliver, TTDG, proposed that Landcare's social knowledge—its knowledge of how to organise, collaborate and influence—is critical to local groups and Networks surviving in difficult conditions and extending their influence. Groups are isolated by physical distance, there's constant pressure for immediate results, little funding for developing capacity, few opportunities to meet and talk with peers beyond each locality, a rural culture of stoicism that leads people to keep their heads down rather than reaching sideways to their peers in Landcare groups and Networks.

We offered this vision:

- Imagine what it would be like for a community leader building a new group or network to be able to talk with someone who had already walked the path they are taking
- Imagine what would happen if a coordinator, facing one of those everyday difficult situations in a community environment organisation, was able to talk with someone else who understood their situation,
- Imagine what would happen to enthusiasm and action across the State if the innovations and learning of other groups and networks could be easily found

¹ Abbreviated in this report as VLC. In May 2017, the VLC joined with the Farm Trees and Landcare Association (FTLA) to form a new organisation, Landcare Victoria Inc (LVI), the peak community-based body for advocacy and services for Landcare in Victoria.

What has CLEA achieved?

CLEA now works at three levels: at the grassroots, supporting local nodes of inquiry in Landcare Network Committees of Management; at regional level, strengthening the networks that connect innovators; and at State level, using LVI's forums for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and problem-solving. Our method has been pragmatic: talk to people in Landcare about what they need, try things out in action, then base the next cycle of action on what we learn. Our achievements are first that we have put in place *support for peer-to-peer learning*.

Peer-to-peer learning at grassroots level

After three years, we are confident we have some of the elements in place to support peer-to-peer learning, and to grow that from *within* the Landcare community rather than imposing it from outside. We have 7 active Landcare Networks in three regions using the CLEA sessions (see *Appendix A*) supporting local action by around 80 Landcare groups.

CLEA's *Questions Without Easy Answers* sessions strengthen peer inquiry in Landcare Network Committees of Management. They think about their Network's long-term future, frame a Question Without Easy Answers, and review past approaches. Committees of Management like doing this, and they initiate action that does build Network capacity. Their Question Without an Easy Answer provides a structure for documenting their progress and feeding this back to them and sharing progress with other Landcare Networks.



Up2Us Landcare Alliance Committee of Management

The constant challenge is that it is easy to get absorbed in immediate project management. Active interest and a nudge from outside is essential. Here is what CoMs say:

It's taken us a long time to take action, but that's been good. We've gone back over our Question in our meetings and that has allowed people to keep thinking about it. While it's been an additional load to make time to think about our Question, it's been good to have the structure it provides. Having it on the agenda has meant we have found out what committee members have done that we didn't know about. We can see how the things we're doing all add up."

Kerstie Lee, Up2Us Landcare Alliance

It's helped us keep pushing in the right direction. Members of the CoM have got out there and got talking to people, and that has made us more aware of the resources in our community. It's made us focus on the value of strengthening the partnerships we've got. And as opportunities for new partnerships have come, we've been able to grab them.

Judy Watts, Upper Goulburn Landcare Network

We've put in place a clear purpose in our rules of association, we've run the first of the "Landcare Connect" sharing sessions between groups, the website is working and "Board Talk " is coming out, so a lot has been done. Most of that was in the pipeline,

but the Questions Without Easy Answers sessions brought us all together to talk about it and agree that it had to be done.

Andrea Mason, President, Leigh Catchment Group

It has made the Committee think about our strengths and come together in promoting what we're doing, getting all of that out to a wider audience. We have started a whole lot of promotional stuff—getting all our work on the website, getting more photos, linking up to clubs interested in the curlew project.

Judy Croker, Coordinator, Mid Loddon Landcare Network

Peer-to-peer learning at regional level

Research with VLC members found that knowledge moves and support flows in the Landcare Community through *Network Weavers*, people who put time into developing their own networks and are willing to share these with others. When you don't know who to go to, Landcare people go to a person who is well connected.



CLEA is putting network weaving on the agenda, with CMAs identifying 'go-to' people with good networks into technical expertise in agriculture, land management and conservation, in the region and across the State, and doing more to get stories of innovators out to Network Weavers across their region. We have begun supporting peer inquiry between Landcare facilitators, offering this on the back of Forums with Landcare Professionals. Four Landcare facilitators have joined this part of the project.

Peer-to-peer learning across the State

CLEA is supporting peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and inquiry in LVIs regional Forums. Two Forums are held each year and 40-60 volunteers and professionals typically attend, even when Forums are held in remote locations. The challenge is to go beyond the typical format of 3 speakers plus questions—participants in these Forums are ready for issue-based knowledge sharing and problem-solving.

LVI's 2017 Landcare Professionals Forum (40 participants) was developed by CLEA as a peer-to-peer event, and trialed three p2p learning formats, contributing to LVI's commitment to support Landcare staff development. Landcare staff built the agenda and CLEA tested three formats for peer learning. Participants valued having time to talk with their fellow facilitators, glean new ideas on the specific topics covered and broadly how to work in communities.



The opportunity to meet and talk at depth with colleagues drew comments like these:

'I realised that we all feel it is quite an isolating role at times even though you are dealing with people a lot of the time. So these gatherings are important.'

'Great to meet or get to know better fellow Landcare workers and have everyone's email for future reference.'

'The connections I made will be a continuing source of ideas and wisdom available down the track. On that basis alone, the two days were productive use of time.'

'The event was incredibly humbling and exciting at the same time - so many amazing people with so much experience and passion!'

New knowledge about peer-to-peer learning

We detect *a new attitude* to peer-to-peer learning. A lot more people are saying:

"We need to get together and talk, so we can learn from each other."

Peer-to-peer learning is coming into its own. CLEA has developed eight understandings about p2p that others in the community environment field can draw:

1. Landcare Networks face very similar social challenges;
2. Landcare's social knowledge is tacit, held within localities;
3. Use what's there - build inquiry into the institutional fabric;
4. Inquiry is a hard road that needs support;
5. Peer-to-peer connections need brokering and maintenance;
6. Knowledge from peer-to-peer learning needs to be published;
7. Network Weavers move knowledge and support around the Landcare community;
8. Peer learning with other community groups is waiting to be tapped.

To read about these, and four more understandings on running a project to support peer-to-peer learning, see *Appendix B: What has CLEA learned about knowledge sharing in the community environment sector?*

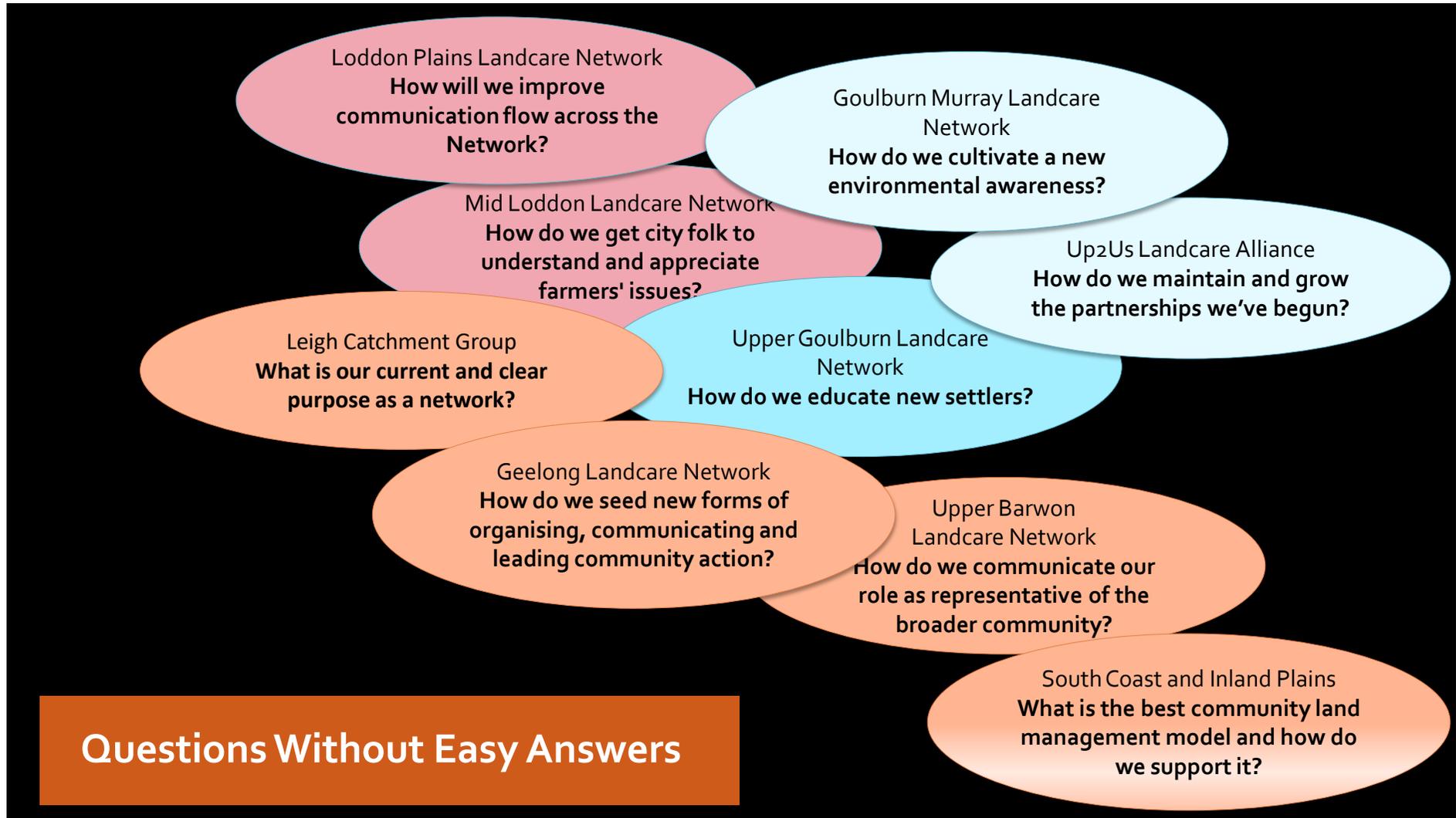
What's next in 2018-19?

1. *Maintain support for peer inquiry by Landcare Network CoMs.* Support the 9 Landcare Networks pursuing their Question Without an Easy Answer. Offer start-up sessions to Networks in other regions as they express their interest, using experienced in-region facilitators to run the CLEA sessions. Our estimate is that around a third of Landcare Network in a region are ready to strengthen peer inquiry in their COM. Taking the sessions to other regions will increase the pool of Networks.

2. *Convene knowledge sharing between community environment groups.* Staff and CoMs typically don't have the time or connections to set up knowledge sharing with other community groups. This is CLEA's role, but how can this be set up so it has a low-cost/high return for groups, and supports application of ideas gleaned from others? In Year 4, CLEA will partner with the Port Phillip Ecocentre to build links between community groups from the top to the bottom of the catchments of Port Phillip Bay, developing a model for peer-to-peer learning that works in this setting. This addresses NRCL's commitment to the community environment sector as a whole, and supports LVI's interest in stronger environmental advocacy in the electorates that most influence governments. Note here that CLEA is using the idea of 'knowledge sharing' as a starting point for a broader suite of peer-to-peer learning: *knowledge sharing* (which breaks the ground and establishes relationships), *peer inquiry* (where groups tackle shared challenges), and *mentoring* (where groups support each other in applying new ideas and learning).
3. *Communicate what environment groups are learning as they share knowledge, inquire together and mentor each other.* Community organisations report to funders what they are doing on-ground, but there's a lot more to community action than the end results. To build the social knowledge in the community environment sector, we need to find ways to document and communicate what groups are learning, what they are doing differently, and the impacts this is having. How do we support localised audio, video and image making to tell these stories, and get this out quickly to those hungry for this knowledge? In Year 4, CLEA will develop a model for growing local capability for stories of the learning that comes from knowledge sharing, peer inquiry and mentoring.
4. *Keep strengthening peer-to-peer learning in LVI's State Forums.* The innovators and community leaders who come to LVI's Forums want to do more than sit and listen. In Year 4, CLEA will work with LVI to develop a policy on peer-to-peer learning, and guidelines to operationalise this in the design of each Forum.
5. *Strengthen learning in networks at regional scale.* We will continue to invite CMAs to take action to support those who already build and connect networks for sharing knowledge and providing support – the *Network Weavers*. Possible actions include: creating clear points of contact for region and State-wide expertise in conservation, land management and sustainable agriculture; profiling innovators across their region, so Network Weavers expand their connections; skilling up facilitators in Network Weaving. The skilling option is ripe for development, using as a starting point the Facilitators/Coordinators meetings organised by each CMA. Another possibility from Corangamite region is mapping the networks critical to a specific program. Another is building up p2p learning in bio-link alliances, in particular the Central Highlands Biolinks Alliance.

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Appendix A: Questions Without Easy Answers



Appendix B: What has CLEA learned about knowledge sharing in the community environment sector?

As an innovation project, CLEA is testing ideas in action to find what works. By reflecting on what works, what doesn't work and why, CLEA also develops knowledge about peer-to-peer learning. Here are 12 understandings, hard-won from three years of inquiry-in-action. The first eight are about peer-to-peer learning itself, the next four about running a project like CLEA.

1. *Landcare Networks and groups face very similar social challenges.* All rural communities are seeing changing demographics (migration in of lifestylers and small lot farmers, and a shift from family to corporate farming). Local affiliation can't be assumed: it has to be created. People who want to contribute don't think about 'being on the committee' as a first step. Current leaders have been organising for a long time, and aren't getting any younger. There's constant change in government programs with large periods of uncertainty as the next focus of funding is developed. Landcare Networks that are adapting are thinking ahead and building the partnerships they think they'll need. Are environmental issues themselves becoming more complex and more contested? Probably, but the community and institutional context certainly is.
2. *Landcare's social knowledge is tacit, and develops mostly within localities.* People in Landcare know a lot about how to organise and influence in their communities. They learn a lot about working with Government programs. But they don't learn this social knowledge from a book or at university. It grows up between them, as they live and work together in a specific locality. This is a strength, but it's also a weakness, because social knowledge stays tacit, locked up in each locality.
3. *Peer inquiry is a hard but profitable road.* Inquiry means finding things out for yourself, with your peers. There are many tool boxes of *answers* for the challenges of organising, collaborating and influencing, but these have to be applied to the specifics of the Landcare scene, and of specific parts of rural and regional Victoria. Peer inquiry supports hand-crafted solutions that start with difficult questions.
4. *Peer-to-peer inquiry needs its own venues.* Getting together and talking needs places to talk. It doesn't happen by itself. In Landcare, pressure to deliver project outputs combines with an action-oriented, biophysical focus in committees and staff. People don't leave time for reflection with peers, especially about the social side of Landcare. The space for reflection, and with that, inquiry with peers, has to be created and held open by outside facilitation.
5. *Peer-to-peer connections need brokering.* Everyone has their heads down working in their own patch—there has to be a very good reason to spend half a day in discussion outside your area. You can't see the shared agenda from local level - someone has to see the links between the questions being asked and the innovations underway, and invite people to get together. Only then will people form the relationships within which they themselves initiate discussion.
6. *Knowledge from peer-to-peer learning needs to be documented and communicated.* What's critical is that learning be tied to questions, documented concisely, and published in ways that let others in Landcare get their hands on it. The people doing the learning do not usually have the time or skills to do this. They need a hand, but that help has to build their capacity and confidence to speak out.

7. *Network Weavers move knowledge and support around the Landcare community.* Network Weavers have good social networks and are happy to share them. These are the people you turn to when you don't know who to turn to! They connect people, so it makes sense to support them and work with them.
8. *Dialogue with others in the community environment space is untapped.* Landcare people talking with Landcare people will only go so far. They would learn a lot from talking across boundaries, regionally with people with energy and sustainability agendas, and in the urban community environment sector. Community environment work is evolving in many different contexts, and knowledge sharing across these contexts will reveal differences in strategies of influence, assumptions, values and narratives.

These are learnings about peer-to-peer learning itself: we also have four insights into how to run a project supporting peer-to-peer learning.

9. *Introducing peer-to-peer learning is slow going and needs a long-term commitment.* CoMs give attention to peer learning about organising, collaborating and influencing, staff *after* immediate project delivery tasks. Response times to emails on next steps, even with Landcare Networks who have set up their QWEA, are slow. Constant quiet invitation is needed. Shifting Landcare into p2p is a long-term project.
10. *Don't go it alone.* Other people are setting up p2p, so let's talk. After flying solo for 3 years, now is the time for CLEA to connect to others. A sector-based think tank that presented project progress and learning across an number of p2p projects would strengthen intellectual capital and sector connections.
11. *Find starting points that complement peer inquiry.* Inquiry is hard work. We need more of the joy of telling and hearing the stories of what is being learned in the community environment sector. We need dip into group/Network knowledge about familiar Landcare processes—how to organise field days, weed projects, rabbit control—where social knowledge is fused to land management knowledge.
12. *We are building social infrastructure for the practice of community environment work.* Since the demise of State Government agricultural extension, there is very little training and knowledge sharing around the social side of environmental work. Institutional supports are overwhelmingly for the bio-physical aspects of environmental work. What is needed is a social infrastructure that nurtures community dimensions of environment work. Rather than waiting and hoping for leadership by government, we need to design peer-to-peer learning that works for the community sector, then show government how it can be part of that.